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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the conclusions of a study of student perceptions of communication competence. Discourse analysis data was collected on students in university systems in six different American states in the East, Midwest, and South. Student discourse was analyzed for differences in the ways in which students described their perceptions of their communication competence. Three dimensions differentiated students in all regional samples: negativity/positivity; physicality/intellectuality; and social bonding/social alienation. Hypotheses regarding relationships between student discourse on the three dimensions were tested. Statistical support was found for associations between negative evaluations of perceived communication competence and conceptualizations of communication competence as a primarily physical activity. Statistical support was also found for associations between negative associations of perceived communication competence and descriptions of social alienation. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/RS)

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A Discourse Analysis of Student Perceptions of their Communication Competence

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A Discourse Analysis of Student Perceptions of their Communication Competence

Abstract

This paper presents the conclusions of a study of student perceptions of communication competence. Discourse analysis data was collected on students in university systems in six different American states in the East, Midwest and South. Student discourse was analyzed for differences in the ways in which students described their perceptions of their communication competence. Three dimensions differentiated students in all regional samples: negativity/positivity, physicality/intellectuality, and social bonding/social alienation. Hypotheses regarding relationships between student discourse on the three dimensions were tested. Statistical support was found for associations between negative evaluations of perceived communication competence and conceptualizations of communication competence as a primarily physical activity. Statistical support was also found for associations between negative associations of perceived communication competence and descriptions of social alienation.

Introduction

This paper presents the conclusions of a discourse analytic study of student perceptions of communication competence. Students from different regions of the United States were asked to write or speak about their communication abilities, skills, previous experiences, and their expectations for the future. Student discourse was analyzed for patterns that revealed shared topics, ideas, and values regarding communication competence in a variety of situations.

Three important categorical dimensions emerged from the analysis. First, student discourse was found to differ on a continuum of negative and positive valence in their evaluations of their perceived communication competence. Some students had good evaluations of their current communication skills or had high expectations of improving their communication skills, whereas other students had negative evaluations of their perceived communication competence and their expectations for self-improvement were pessimistic. Second, student discourse varied from a conceptual focus on the purely physical features of communication competence to a conceptual focus which was primarily intellectual. When students evaluated their communication competence, students frequently described their perceived effectiveness primarily in physical terms. In contrast, other students described their perceived effectiveness in terms of their intellectual ability. Third, student discourse differed in terms of statements which revealed social alienation or social bonding. Students frequently evaluated their communication competence in terms of their ability to interact in a socially successful manner and described their communication competence in terms of their desires, intentions, and comfort in a variety of social situations.

Hypotheses were constructed to test relationships between the three discourse dimensions discovered in the discourse analysis. It was hypothesized that students who evaluated their communication competence in a negative manner would be more inclined to describe themselves as socially alienated than students who evaluated their

communication competence in a positive manner. There is some previous research on this dimension which is discussed later in the paper. It was also hypothesized that students who conceptualized communication competence as a primarily physical performance would be more inclined to view their communication competence negatively.

Literature Review

Discourse analysis research has been pioneering methods for analyzing cultural patterns in communication research since the 1970's. Examples of the discourse analytic approach to the analysis of spoken and written discourse include Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates (2001), Hammersley (1997), Fairclough (1997), Edwards (1997), Potter (1996), Kress (1994), Coulthard (1992, 1994), and Van Dijk (2002, 1985a, 1984a).

The literature in communication competence contains little research employing a discourse analytic methodology. Most competence research has tended to focus on behavioral components. As stated by Duran and Spitzberg (1995), "Most research in the area of communication competence has focused on the psycho-motor and, to a lesser extent, the affective domain (e.g. communication apprehension, willingness to communicate)" (p. 259). Although several scholars, including Carbaugh (1993) and Koester, Wiseman & Sanders (1993), have advocated opening the field to qualitative research, research in the area of communication competence still remains dependent on objective measures, such as experiments and surveys.

This reliance on primarily objective tests of competence has continued despite theoretical developments within both interpersonal and intercultural communication concluding that communication competence is an inherently subjective process. Lustig and Spitzberg (1993) state that the "inherent subjectivity of competence becomes obvious when one chooses the referents for what constitutes quality in human interaction, as several metaphors have been used to define quality" (p.153). According to Koester, Wiseman & Sanders (1993), the current view of competence as a relation between

participants or co-participants "requires recognition that competence is not determined by knowledge, motivation, or skills of only one of the parties in the interaction, but rather that judgments of competence are relational outcomes" (p.7).

The first part of this paper describes the sample of "discourse data" that was assembled for the study. The next two parts describe two sets of conclusions about the data set. The first set of conclusions is derived from the discourse analysis and consists of generalizations about the patterns of language use that characterized student writing and speaking about their perceived communication competence. The second set of conclusions is derived from a statistical analysis of a random sample of the discourse data set. The last part of the paper compares the results of the two analyses to previous research on communication competence.

Description of the Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 940 undergraduate students from communication classes held at several universities in the United States. Three regions of the country are represented in this sample, the Northeast, the South and the Midwest. The demographic breakdowns are based on student interviews and writing and, in some cases, observation. The sampling procedure was performed throughout the 1990's. The same topic was addressed in all these samples and similar procedures were used in each classroom (interviews, essays) to assess students' perceptions of their communication competence. No differences have been found as a result of the year in which the sample was done and no statistically significant differences have been found as a result of region, although there were some minor differences between regions.

The data collected on students consisted primarily of a camouflaged writing sample which all students were instructed to do as part of an in-class exercise. Students were asked to write or speak about their communication abilities, skills, previous experiences and their expectations for the future. Interviews were also conducted with all students as

part of routine class instruction and formed the basis for some of the data reported in this paper. These student discourses were analyzed for patterns that revealed shared topics, ideas and values regarding communication competence in a variety of situations. All students discussed in this paper have been coded to protect their confidentiality.

Three Dimensions of Communication Competence

Student discourse was found to differ on a continuum of negativity and positivity with respect to their current and prospective communication competence. For example, some students had high expectations for improving their communication skills, whereas other students were pessimistic to the point of apathy. Second, student discourse differed between a focus on the purely physical features of what they considered effective communication and a focus which was primarily intellectual in its emphasis. Finally, student discourse differed in terms of statements which revealed social alienation or social bonding. The next section describes how these dimensions have been coded and analyzed within this sample of student essays. Thus, within the data set, there were three conceptual dimensions along which student discourse differed: (1) positivity/negativity, (2) physicality/intellectuality, and (3) social alienation/social bonding. Each discourse dimension can be differentiated in several ways, yielding a detailed description of student discourse in these three content areas. The following sections describe how these dimensions were coded within the sample of student essays.

Dimension 1: Positivity/Negativity

Examples of student statements that describe their communication skills in a positive fashion are:

(a) "As a communicator I feel that my personal communication skills are strong. I have no problems voicing my opinion on subjects that I feel strong and confident about." [#29 f/sp/Am/C/lmcl]

(b) "I would love to accomplish so many things with my communication skills. I have good communication skills...I can walk up to someone and just start talking...I like to work in groups so everyone can say what's on their minds and I know where they stand." [#32 f/js/Am/C/mcl]

(c) "My background in speech and communication has been quite broad compared to many other college freshmen. I took two speech classes in high school and I work in a retail store, which requires me to communicate with customers frequently. I feel that I communicate well with others." [#56, Dr/C/m/Mcl]

In contrast to the above statements, negative statements about one's communication behavior describe communication performance as poor, weak, ineffectual, undisciplined, or otherwise incompetent or undesirable. Examples are:

(a) "During this semester, my main goal is to pass this class so that I never have to take another speech class..... Somehow I can never find the words when I am talking to someone. Especially if the topic is highly important. And I'm definitely not good with groups of people." [#7/Dr/m/C/lmcl]

(b) "Communicating verbally has always been a problem for me. I never much liked talking in front of a small group of people, especially people my age or younger. It always made me feel uncomfortable. I seem to have a crack in my voice." [#2 f/ja/Am/C/lmcl]

(c) "I think my communication skill is poor. First, I can't speak English very well. sometimes, people don't understand what I say and I don't get what they say. Secondly, I don't like to talk a lot. I prefer quiet than noisy or talking. That is also why I don't have lots of friends. Third, I am shy. I feel embarrassed to talk in front of a lot of people. Fourth, I am also not good at writing. I think I need to improve my communication skills." [#24/Dr/A/f/Mcl]

Dimension 2: Physicality/Intellectuality

Statements that describe the student's communication ability in physical terms emphasize the student's perception of the communication process as a primarily physical

interaction. Student's who view communicators as attractive or unattractive bodies, faces and voices evaluate their competence according to extremely physical criteria. Within this perspective is the view that effective communication is primarily a performance and that disciplining the face and body is an essential part of good communication. These students often view their perceived failures as a result of lack of physical or emotional self-control. Examples of statements which portray the student as a physical communicator are:

(a) "Communication abilities that I would like to improve are speaking in front of an audience and not being nervous or fidgety. .....Even though I have done many speeches in my day I still get nervous when I give a speech. All the questions go into my head like 'Do they think my clothes are ugly or are they staring at a certain part of me?'" [#10/js/f/grl/mcl]

(b) "When I give oral presentations, I tend to say "um" in between words. I try to relax, but I never know how to. It feels weird having everyone's eyes and attention centered on me. I've tried imagining people wearing nothing but their undergarments, but it is kind of sick to think about it. I always look at one of my friends, but he/she always makes me laugh. I need to overcome this." [#4f/js/I/A/lmcl]

(c) "When I am around my friends or my close family, I feel very comfortable; however, when I am put into a situation where I do not know anyone or when I am in a room filled with older adults I get very quiet. I have trouble getting my words out and I get very fidgety. I also sweat a lot when I am nervous which can be very embarrassing. I just wish that I could feel totally comfortable around everyone and be able to make eye contact when I speak to someone. Often I look down and play with my hands or mess with the clothes I am wearing (Anything so I do not have to look directly into the person's eyes)." [#2/f/js/gr/A/mcl]

Student descriptions of their communication abilities often read like a textbook description of stage fright, for example, sweating palms, nervous spasms, voice too soft, mumbling, too many "ums", and rapid diction. What distinguishes some of these

descriptions is the fear of being regarded as an unattractive person, as well as the fear of intruding on the audience in some unseemly, physical fashion. In contrast to these physical descriptions of self as communicator are descriptions of intellectual intentions when communicating. Much of the time, student descriptions of intellectual intentions are expressed as criticisms of their ability to structure their thoughts or to present their thoughts in an effective manner. The following statements are examples of student preoccupation with communication as an intellectual endeavor.

(a) "I would like to improve my ability (or inability) to constrain myself to the original subject I began speaking about. I have a tendency to allow myself to be overcome by thought association bandits that attempt to make off with my original line of thinking leaving me with some other idea that the original idea reminded me of. I can go off tangents indefinitely." [#3. m/js/Am/C]

(b) "Some of the communication skills that I would like to attain by the end of this class would be firstly to make others understand my point of view of things in life in general, especially because I am a foreign student and haven't been in the United States for too long." [#13 f/js/I/I]

(c) "In this class, I hope to learn how to communicate to my employers now and in the future. As of now, I cannot relate my ideas, problems and questions clearly and appropriately while at work." [#32/Dr/C/f//Mcl]

Dimension 3: Social Bonding/Social Alienation

Student expressions of social bonding are statements that are optimistic, hopeful or in other ways positively predisposed towards interaction with either their fellow students or with members of the community. Examples of statements that express the student's feelings and/or values regarding social interaction are:

(a) "I tended to be good with people. I am 21 now and I am on a first name basis with many of our customers. Through this job I have gone from "would you like something else with that" to a competent sales person. It is a position where I have to deal with many

people: happy, confused, angry: I get them all. Over the years I have learned how to deal with the inconsistencies of human communication. I know not how to falter under pressure. It has become an incredibly valuable job." [#42 m/js/Am/C/lmcl]

(b) "Also, when it comes to being a good listener or when one needs my view or suggestions on a matter, I am all ears and open-minded. I am very sympathetic to one's needs, so I make them feel comfortable when we are conversing with each other." [#29 f/sp/Am/C/lmcl]

In contrast to the above statements are statements that express pessimistic, negative or hopeless statements about future social interactions. Examples of statements that express feelings of social alienation are the following:

(a) "Approaching new people my age or age group has always made me a little nervous. Depending on the people and or situation I can feel intimidated." [#42 m/js/Am/C/lmcl]

(b) "I am somewhat of an introvert when it comes to group discussions or simply when having to mingle with others. My fears are receiving rejectful comments or signs, body language, that the audience is not acknowledging my input in the conversation. In a large audience, my voice becomes very small and my objective becomes disorganized. By taking this course, I would like to overcome most of the negative communications skills that I have described above." [#22/f/js/KJ/lm]

(c) "Communicating verbally has always been a problem for me. I never much liked talking in front of a small group of people, especially people my age or younger. It always made me feel uncomfortable. I seem to have a crack in my voice. Written communication is not as hard for me, but it takes me awhile to write a paper exactly the way I like it. I never really had a problem in front of small children. I used to tutor and I never felt uncomfortable speaking to them." [#2 f/jaco/Am/B/lmcl]

A Quantitative Analysis of Some Discourse Analysis Conclusions

The three dimensions appear to account for important aspects of student discourse, but are there interrelationships between these dimensions? Are negative and positive valences related in some manner to physical conceptualizations of communication? Is social alienation related to a more physical conception of communication? Does a negative communication evaluation include social alienation and a more physical conceptualization? Are these dimensions empirically separate from each other or do they seem to merge with each other? To address these questions, a random sample of 100 student essays was drawn from the original data set and the three dimensional codings were statistically analyzed. Three hypotheses were constructed to compare and contrast the frequencies with which different codings were paired.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicts that negative evaluations of perceived communication competence should be associated with more physical conceptions of communication competence.

H1: The frequency of negative evaluations associated with descriptions of physicality will be significantly higher than the frequency of negative evaluations associated with descriptions of intellectuality at alpha = .01..

H0: There is no statistically significant association between frequency of negative evaluation and the physicalistic conception at alpha =.01.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis predicts that students' negative perceptions of their competence are related to descriptions of themselves as socially alienated at alpha = .01.

H2: The frequency of negative evaluations being associated with descriptions of social alienation will be significantly higher than the frequency of negative evaluations being associated with descriptions of social bonding at alpha = .01.

H0: There is no statistically significant association between negative evaluations and social alienation at alpha = .01.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis predicts that there will be an association between physicalism and social alienation.

H3: Students who conceptualize communication competence as a purely or primarily physical performance will tend to describe themselves as social alienated rather than socially bonded at alpha = .01.

H0: There is no statistically significant association between physical conceptualizations and statements expressing social alienation at alpha= .01.

Statistical Results

Physicality is Associated with Negative Self-Evaluations

The results of the chi-square tests support H1 being the case in the sample as chi-square scores were strong at χ^2 (4, N=100) =20.068, p <.01. Thus, students whose written evaluations of their individual competence were negative tended to describe their conception of communication competence in a more physical manner than did students whose written evaluations of their individual competence was positive. Tests were designed to pair negative and positive codings with physical and intellectual codings in a 2 by 2 cross tabulation. Neutral codings, used to rule out ambiguous codings on each dimension, expanded the cross tabulation to a 3 by 3 statistical comparison in which tests of significance would be more difficult to achieve. In spite of the neutral codings, the chi-quare tests were fairly strong and constitute support for H1.

Social Alienation is Associated with Negative Self-Evaluations

The results of the chi-square tests support H2 at χ^2 (4, N=100) =30.90, p <.01. Social alienation discourse was associated with negative evaluations of communication

competence. As with Hypothesis 1, a 3 by 3 crosstabulation was performed for Hypothesis 2, testing for statistical relationships between negative/positive/neutral evaluations and social bonding/social alienation/and neutral discourse. It appears that more students who described themselves as socially alienated also evaluated their perceived communication competence in a negative fashion than did students who described themselves as socially bonded.

Physicality Appears to be Unrelated to Social Alienation

As a test of independence of the two dimensions, physicality/intellectuality and social alienation/social bonding, a 3 by 3 crosstabulation of physicality/intellectuality/neutrality and social bonding/social alienation/neutrality was performed. Here, chi-square tests show no statistical associations between students who conceptualize communication in a physical sense with students who describe themselves as socially alienated. Thus, physicalistic conceptualizations do not appear to be strongly related to feelings of social alienation in the sample and the two dimensions appear to be, in a statistical sense, categorizing different aspects of student discourse.

Comparing the Conclusions to Previous Research

Students in this study often evaluated their communication negatively because their experiences were painful, uncomfortable or unsuccessful. These self-descriptions corroborate Hecht's (1972) theory that "(c)ommunication satisfaction is one of the outcomes commonly associated with competent communication" (p.). The reasons why students often evaluated their uncomfortable and unsuccessful communication experiences as signs of communication incompetence has also been analyzed analyzed by Backlund (1983) who concluded that "it is possible for a person to be incompetent and ineffective at the same time, competent while being ineffective, incompetent while being effective, and

competent while being effective" (p.7). Similarly, Allman, O'Hairr & Stewart (1994) conclude that "(c)ompetence and satisfaction are inextricably intertwined" (p.365).

Duran and Spitzberg (1995) have identified four temporally discrete mental processes essential to cognitive communication competence: "(1) the anticipation of contextual variables that may potentially influence one's communication choices; (2) perception of the consequences of one's communication choices; (3) immediate reflection, and (4) general reflection upon the choices one has made" (p.262). Students in this sample wrote about their expectations of success or failure based on their analysis of previous experiences and rated their own current communication ability in terms of their memories of their communication experiences.

The social alienation dimension has been discussed primarily by scholars analyzing the communication perceptions of foreign-born students, such as, for example, in the work of McDermott (1991) and McGuire & McDermott (1987). McGuire and McDermott (1987) conceptualize the social alienation dimension in terms of the acculturation process: "To be completely acculturated one must be assimilated and not deviate from norms; on the other hand, one who deviates is "foreign" and potentially alienated" (p.42). Martin and Hammer's (1989) research distinguishes a variety of communicative behaviors that indicate desires for social bonding, such as being friendly, making the other comfortable, showing interest, and being responsive (p.308-313).

The research conclusions presented in this paper corroborate and elaborate on a variety of theories and perspectives in previous research. There are four heuristic research questions generated by this analysis. The first is what types of communication experiences and expectations are associated with different valences? Some student characterizations of perceived competence were based on memories of past communication successes and failures; additionally, students predictions of future successes and failures frequently conflated current communication anxieties with future performance. Student ability to accurately predict their successes or failures was erratic often accounting for much of their

anxiety and perhaps contributing to communication failure. Thus, the manner in which students have acquired certain versions of their communication history should be further explored along with the manner in which students routinely predict the outcomes of communication activities.

Second, the communication awareness of students has been underestimated in the literature. How does communication awareness function in the development of communication competence? Students are often intensely aware that their communication competence is being assessed, not only by their communication instructors, but by peers, friends and relatives. Student descriptions of self-conscious scrutinizing of their past and present communication experiences illustrate student awareness of being observed and of observing and evaluating others.

Third, what is the relation between perceptions of attractiveness and communication competence? The notion of effective communication as a primarily physical accomplishment was a striking aspect of student discourse on the topic. Attractiveness is commonly perceived in American society as being primarily physical, particularly with the ascendance of media which emphasize visual images of persons interacting with each other. Within the discourse data set, physical and intellectual conceptualizations of communication competence competed with conceptualizations of communication competence as a social ability. Both physical and intellectual conceptualizations of communication competence were often linked to an image of the socially successful communicator, rather than the, for example, articulate or empathic communicator. This linking of social success with physical and intellectual attractiveness often prevented subjects from developing their own communication competence.

Finally, preliminary analysis of the discourse set indicates that demographic factors may be associated with differences in the ways in which subjects evaluate their communication competence. Examples of extreme tendencies, whether extremely

negative, alienated or physical were frequently written by females, minorities, and socioeconomically deprived students, although these instances were not associated with statistically significant counts. But further research should be done to study the conceptions of communication competence that are held by conventionally disadvantaged groups.

Conclusion

Most research on competence is observer-biased in that primarily empirical measures are used which ignore the perceptions of the subjects evaluated. An extensive discourse analysis of a regional sample revealed three dimensions along which student discourse differed when describing or analyzing communication. Student discourse was found to differ on a continuum of negativity and positivity. Second, student discourse differed in terms of a focus on the physical features of what they considered effective communication to a focus on the intellectual. Third, student discourse differed in terms of statements which revealed social alienation or social bonding. Statistical analysis of one hundred essays selected from the original set revealed that negative evaluations of perceived communication competence are associated with physical conceptualizations of communication competence. Statistical analysis also demonstrated that negative evaluations of communication competence are associated with statements expressing social alienation.

These research conclusions were compared to previous research on communication competence and found to corroborate and elaborate conclusions on the relationship between satisfaction and perceived competence, memories of communication action and expectations of communication success, and desires for social bonding. Finally, the research described in this paper generated several heuristic questions for the study of communication competence.

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